

*April, 2009*

*A scene of the Yoshino Mountains covered with varieties of pink and white cherry blossoms truly is an unexplainably beautiful site. Watching the blossoms reflect off the river in Tsukigase is like watching a beautiful oil painting come to life. However, scattered all throughout Nara are equally magnificent lone sakura trees that should not be forgotten. Many local temples and shrines have their own sakura, standing proudly all by themselves. [Hozoji's](#) weeping cherry tree is an example of one of these lone trees that creates a link to history and the essence of life.*

*One of the most famous traditional songs in Japan is "Sakura, Sakura." Originally it was called "Saita Sakura" ("Blooming Cherry Blossoms") and was written as a koto piece for children. Today its beautiful melody is performed regularly on the shakuhachi as well. Just last week I performed this song at Myouhouji Temple in Yoshino. Everyone seemed to enjoy the traditional pieces, but it wasn't until I played this familiar song, and everyone sang along with it, that I realized the power of unification this song holds. Because of it being known as truly representing Japanese culture and aesthetics there have even been calls to replace the current controversial national anthem (Kimi ga yo) with the beloved "Sakura, Sakura."*

*An interesting feature of this song, not unlike many traditional Japanese art works, is that there is no accredited original composer. I find this cultural practice quite interesting because it shows how, in the past, the creator of the work was of less importance. Many artists believed that they were merely an instrument from which their art flowed effortlessly from nature or some spiritual force. Many unnamed great works of pottery and calligraphy remain today for the simple reason that they were and still are regarded as something beautiful, not merely because someone's name or stamp was left on it. Similarly, the artists realized that they were actually only a small part of something much greater than one individual. They had a place within nature and amid a series of interdependent relationships within the school rooted in a particular musical tradition. There was no need to place a value on something by putting your name on it. Very similar to those lone cherry trees, these artists, poets, and musicians were never really alone. With their deep roots, they both rely on other elements in nature.*

*Stemming from an old ritual of offering sake at the foot of the cherry trees to the gods who abided in the trees, the hanami (flower observing) parties of today are an important part of social bonding in Japan. However, there is a saying: "hana yori dango" ("dumplings rather than flowers"). This reflects the feeling that many people are more concerned with eating and drinking than actually appreciating the flowers.*

*One thing that people tend to forget is that in the past--when poets, philosophers, and commoners alike got together for this event--they were actually pondering the great significance of this flower in relation to life and impermanence. This year I hope everyone takes a little time and reflects on how fragile our existence is here. It may sound dark, but by observing our evanescence and by realizing that just like the cherry blossoms we too will all be blown away with a slight gust of wind, we can better appreciate and enjoy the gift of life we have now.*

*This April 24<sup>th</sup>, come and join Izuḱawa Hidefumi and I at the Sentosai festival held at Heijyokyo (The Nara Imperial Palace Site). With shakuhachi and synthesizer, among other songs, we will perform "Sakura, Sakura" and an original "Sakura" song.*